TIME OUT
Mark 6:30-36
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John M. Buchanan
Broad St. Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Somewhere in the scheme of things there is serious confusion. The calendar says that tomorrow is Monday, September 7, Labor Day. The calendar also says that the year will end four months from now and that a new year will begin on January 1. The calendar, however, is alone in perpetuating that myth. Things simply are not that way. I was pleased to discover that Mike Harden, who writes editorials for the Citizen Journal, agrees. Yesterday he observed that Labor Day is the end of one year and the beginning of another. Everybody knows that a new segment of measurable time, (a segment called 1981-82), begins the day after tomorrow. The Educational establishment knows it. The year begins now, not January 1. The organizations and committees to which we give our time are about to gear up once again. Relationships will be renewed, new fashions revealed, new television shows introduced and new automobiles, 1982 models of course, soon will be in the showrooms. Everybody knows that tomorrow is really New Years Day.

I'm increasingly interested in the personal dynamics of the transition which is about to happen. There is anticipation and excitement, of course. But there is also a bit of a pall, a hint of dread almost, a sense that what we just spent two months putting together is going to start to come unglued: an unstated fatalism, that life-beginning this week is going to become increasingly uncontrollable. That's part of what I hear as people greet one another. It's as if something terrible is about to happen. And I thought the occasion might be right to reflect on the fact.

The New Testament lesson this morning is appropriate. Early in his ministry Jesus sent his friends on what must have been a field trip in discipleship. Their instructions were to go, two by two, into the small villages of Galilee, teaching, preaching, healing the sick, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God had come into the life of the world. And now they had returned from this adventure. They must have been very effective. Mark tells us that they stirred up so much commotion in Galilee that Herod thought John the Baptist had come back to life. I imagine that they were exhausted when they caught up with Jesus again; drained physically, emotionally, spiritually. The first thing he said to them was, "Come away by yourselves, to a lonely place and rest awhile." Mark adds the delightfully human explanation, "for they had no leisure to eat, so many were coming and going", which has always reminded me of our home around dinner time.

Jesus understood that his friends needed some time alone: time out from the frantic pace they had been keeping; time to reflect and discuss and assimilate what they had been doing; time to gather strength for another venture; time to be themselves, by themselves. It is an unadorned, simple directive he gave them: one which you and I, it seems, would be very hard-pressed to follow.

There is not much solitude in our life.. ahead of us, frankly. We know it, feel a little guilty about it, but mostly we have concluded that there is nothing much we can do about it except submit to it.

That dynamic is what I suggest we think about this morning. To help us, I would bring to our task the work of Dr. Wayne Oates, Professor of the Psychology of Religion at Louisville Southern Baptist and a recognized authority in the fields of pastoral care and counseling. Professor Oates maintains that the dynamic of over-busyness, guilt to fatalism exists because there is a contagious disease among us called "workaholism". Professor Oates wrote a book ten years ago about it called, Confessions of a Workaholic: The Facts about Work Addiction. I found myself and most of the people I know easily within the boundaries of his definition.

Workaholism, according to Professor Oates, is "addiction to work, the compulsion of uncontrollable need to work incessantly...It has its beginnings in childhood. It becomes acute in second and third decades of life. If it is not reversed or arrested in the forties or early fifties, it becomes chronic and may lead to death in one form or another in the late fifties and/or sixties." (p. 1)

Oates has a wry sense of humor and while the entire book is a bit playful - he keeps grounding his conclusion in the observations of academic psychology. He cites Howard Clinebell for instance: "dependence on overwork and dependence on overeating are psychologically very similar to drug dependency."

How can you tell if you are a workaholic? AA has helped us to be sensitive to the warning signs of alcohol addiction in ourselves and those we love. What are the early signs of workaholism?

1. A workholic, in the middle of social conversation will tell how early he came to work; how late he stayed; how little sleep he's been getting, comparing himself favorably to Thomas Edison, who, everybody knows, never slept at all.

2. A workaholic, in private conversation, will compare the amount of work she is capable of producing with the paltry amount achieved by her peers. A workaholic is always busy: even at leisure she is tightly programmed and running slightly behind.

3. A workaholic can't say "no". A familiar litany is, "If I don't do this job, who will." Oates observes objectively: "...he is likely to take on more and more over and above his prescribed activities. He is a perfectionist but he commits himself to so many people for the use of his skills that he cannot do the job well. This results in an anxiety depression amounting to panic." (p. 60)

4. A workaholic has real trouble with leisure. Back in 1918 a psychoanalyst by the name of Fercuczi observed "Sunday neurosis" in busy executives. By Sunday afternoon they were experiencing anxiety, physical distress, depression. A workaholic takes little if any time off, often forgoes vacation, or works while on vacation, works all day Saturday and Sunday morning, and is simply incapable of relaxing in leisure.

5. A workaholic is "other-directed", rather than "inner-directed". David Riesman in The Lonely Crowd, coined the phrase "other directed". It means behavior determined from outside "rather than by an autonomous self that makes decisions on the basis of a carefully developed value system." (p. 14) A workaholic doesn't have an inner life, the prerequisite for a strong sense of identity.

6. A workaholic has problems with the theology of grace, the idea of God's unearned love. He or she cannot deal with forgiveness without paying, and whenever the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed simply doesn't hear the Good News. Workaholics believe they can produce everything they need, alone. If they need spiritual benefit, they'll get it by working for it; not by receiving an open-ended offer from God. Thus life is invested in building a "mighty fortress" - an impregnable bastion of security...in public esteem, in professional skill, in real estate - in money. The name of the game is working for salvation.

Those are the signs. We see all of them in some people and some of them in all.

The real problem with the workaholic, however, is that he or she is applauded, praised and supported by the culture. Excessive work is seen, not as a problem, but as evidence of commitment, love, loyalty and self sacrifice. The Protestant work ethic - the drum to which most of us march - is very suspicious of idleness and the model of the successful, upwardly mobile man or woman is the one who works harder than anybody else, is at the office earliest, stays latest, and works through lunch. Organizations love workaholics. William H. Whyte, in his classic study, "The Organization Man", discovered that large organizations depend on those ascetics who will subordinate all for the organization and, of course, will pay him or her handsomely.

It is possible to laugh at most of those observations. Oates means his book to be amusing. What isn't funny at all is the price nearly everybody in medicine, psychology, religion, and management agrees we must pay for work addiction: burn out - divorce - family alienation - ulcers - alcoholism - heart attack - depression - suicide.

Erik Erikson identified one kind of depression as "work paralysis", in which a "person has striven so hard and achieved so long that the organism rebels and refuses to produce any more." (p. 5)

What I see is the guilt. We know the price we are paying personally. We see the effects in our relationships, we know what we are neglecting, the joy we are missing. The guilt itself becomes a heavy load to bear.

What is the answer? One is tempted to propose the logical antidote: rebel, revolt, react. Some do. Some must. Some sell out, cash in, retire the business attire and take up pottery in the mountains of West Virginia. That seems logical, but obviously everybody can't do that. In fact, somewhere in this exercise I want to say something in praise of hard work and in defense of self sacrifice for goals that are intrinsically worthy, such as the security and well-being of one's family, the education of one's children, the cultivation of professional skills or the planting of a straight row of corn. Working hard, by itself, is not indicative of addiction. Somewhere in this I want to testify to the grace of hard work, the fulfillment of extending oneself and accomplishing and completing and ending the day with a sense that some things are a little better for what one has done. I'm grateful, frankly, that there are people almost possessed with their work to find a cure for cancer. I'm glad for hard working, self sacrificing lawyers and bankers and teachers and carpenters and preachers. The solution is not laziness, unemployment, sloth.

The antidote is, first of all, the simple responsibility each of us has, regardless of age, station, or status, to assign priorities to all the demands made of us starting with our personal needs, relational needs, professional requirements, and avocational pursuits. They are not all equal. Our personal needs come first - when that list gets out of order, unhealthy things begin to happen.

The solution is, second, to come to terms with the need each of us has for an inner life. We may have buried that need. We may be frightened of the very idea. But each of us needs inner space, time, a lonely place to use Jesus' phrase. We have no authenticity, no core, no identity without that.

It may be simply the discipline of regular public worship. It may be a quiet time each day to read, think, meditate. It may be a combination of all of that.

Listen to Wordsworth on the topic of taking time to experience the gift of the world around us.

"The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours:
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. - Great God! I'd rather be
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn,
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimspes that would make me less forlorn." (p. 51)

The development of an inner life can be the source of renewed vigor. It is no secret that creativity is released in solitude, that insights occur and new ideas are born when mind and spirit are free. Great people have always known that. One of the reasons Abraham Lincoln is so fascinating is that he knew it intuitively. He sat on the porch of the White House rocking and thinking. A newspaper characterized him as "a study in inertia". Ulysses Grant, on the otherhand, was a workaholic, one of the most energetic, hardest working Presidents we have ever had.

It is finally, I am convinced, a theological issue. It is a matter, ultimately of coming to terms with grace - and that may mean the necessity of a conversion experience for many of ~~us.~~ Our addiction to work is theological. It springs from our inability to trust anybody else or conversely, from our egotism which keeps telling us that we can be self-sufficient, self-reliant, that we need nothing.

I was touched to read Professor Oates' recollection of his conversion from a lifetime of workaholism. He became aware of his addiction when his child kept reminding him how much he was missing. His awareness grew with a back problem which became worse when he overworked. The crisis came when his eldest son was in Vietnam. Oates writes: "He was a combat sailor, a machine-gunner on a small river assault boat in the Mekong Delta. And for the first time in my life I was helpless. None of my actions or work could change a thing. I found myself falling back heavily on extra work to handle my anxiety. In the summer, my major defense was gone...I realized that I could not face it alone, but that I needed God's help and the help of all the other people I could get."

And so one man changed his way of living, and started coming home at 6:00 without exception, and became very careful about extra commitments, and began to trust that God indeed would save him, and that he didn't have to do it all alone. His testimony is that it worked and that the amount and the quality of his work has not suffered at all. And this is perhaps the worst - but also the best news of all.

The Good News of the Gospel is that in Jesus Christ God loves us. That graceful love. requires no work, no merit, only our receptiveness. That grace is sufficient...it can liberate us even from our addiction to work. It frees us for full life, it frees us from all the schemes by which we try to assure our security.

We need to help one another. It occurs to me that many of the people who work very, very hard, are giving a lot of themselves to the church, and that the committees of the congregation might suffer mass resignation from people who are hearing this sermon. So be it. If the institutional church is feeding your addiction, if you are a volunteer for any reason other than that you want to be here - and believe in what you are doing - if you are away from a family and feeling guilty - please resign. Let us help each other. Let us help each other to use the time God has given, responsibly, effectively, and gratefully. Let us support the person who decides to arrange priorities honestly, and to take time to do the important things. Let us never judge or condemn when we see it happen.

And in the midst of it all, let us covenant together to remember that our chief end, according to those wise old theologians, is not to work till we drop in our tracks, but to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Amen.